Work/Cited Episode 13 Transcript

Ian Fowler: Thank you all for joining us today on our 13th episode of Work/Cited. My name is Ian Fowler. I am the Curator of Maps for The New York Public Library. Work/Cited is a program series that showcases the latest scholarship supported by the rich collections of The New York Public Library with a behind the scenes look at how the finished product was inspired, researched, and created. Today's speakers are Dr. Elizabeth Cronin, Curator of Photography here at The New York Public Library, and Lydia Pyne, a writer interested in the history of science and material culture. We're here to discuss Lydia's new book, *Postcards: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Social Network*. And I will put a link to the book in the chat in a moment. Our guests will speak for about 30 minutes, and then we'll open the conversation. Please use the Q&A function to share your questions and comments. Questions can be submitted throughout the talk. If you wish to remain anonymous, please check that option. If you'd like to chat, please share your comments with all of our attendees by switching your audience over to panelists and attendees. Elizabeth and Lydia, please take it away.

Elizabeth Cronin: Thank you, Ian, it's really a pleasure to be talking to Lydia Pyne today. And I have to say that I myself, like many others of these attendees, I'm very sure love postcards. And I am one of those people who actually likes to send them still and letters. And I realized that not everyone does these days, but I'm pretty sure that almost everyone likes to receive them in the mail. So we can talk more about that as we get started, and here I put up two of our collections -- we have a huge collection of postcards at the library. And Lydia will speak more to that. But we have thousands, and, you know, you as the public, you're welcome to come and view them anytime. So let's get started with talking about your book, which I also have here to advertise. I want to know -- you are a historian of science and have written books before and the ones that are, you know, at least from their titles are seemingly very different from this postcards book. So can you please, you know, elaborate on what inspired you to write a book about postcards and how you first got interested in the subject?

Lydia Pyne: Yeah, thank you. As you mentioned, my background is in history of science and also archaeology. So I'm interested broadly in material culture, like all sorts of things material culture. And I came to be interested in postcards specifically, back in 2015 actually. I was doing research for a different book called bookshelf that was an object and cultural history of bookshelves. And I went to The New York Public Library as part of my East Coast tour of giant institutional bookshelves and they have wonderful bookshelves. And while I was at The New York Public Library, I happen to come across the collection of postcards, and saw these amazing, yes, exactly these card catalogs full of postcards, and just started perusing through them and was so struck by the sheer quantity, by the vastness of it -- of these postcards that I was looking at, I became really intrigued with, with what it would be like to unpack the material and social lives of these postcards. As I looked at these postcards, it felt like I was looking at a

social network that had been collapsed, and just put into card catalog shelves. And so I sort of filed the ideal way and said, I would like to come back and look at this again in the future.

Elizabeth: And maybe we can talk about how the postcards are -- they're like artifacts, right?

Lydia: Yes.

Elizabeth: And they can't, especially the ones here at the library that have been collected and saved and put it into these large cabinets.

Lydia: Yes, so postcards are the largest artifact class that humankind has made, created, and exchanged and that just blew my mind as somebody interested in material culture, that historians estimate that there were something like 200 billion, like billion with a B. Postcards that were manufactured around the beginning of the 20th century. And so in looking at the -- so I came back to The New York Public Library archives, the Picture Collection, and spent some time in 2018 and in 2019 looking at these different sets of postcards. And I started looking at some of these that we have here and looking at the idea that some monuments, some things, some churches, some set of things simply perform really well on the front of a postcard. And it was really fun to look at them as artifacts, as you mentioned, and just sort of trace the evolution of the postcard, how they're pictured, over time how these objects are pictured over time. Oh, and I did want to throw in one other note of sources for this book project. So I definitely made ample use of The New York Public Library sources, other online archives for postcards, but I also ended up being gifted with shoeboxes and shoeboxes full of old family postcards. And once word got out in my extended family that I was working on a project about postcards, people just started sending all of these postcards to me. And it really helped emphasize the idea that there are so many different kinds of postcards coming from so many different ways and places. That it was a really great way to begin thinking about how to make sense of the material lives of postcards. And I wanted to emphasize the postcard there on the right. That was sent to me, it was -- actually the postcard itself is unsent, it was kept as a souvenir. And it came to me with a note from my grandmother that said, "Ran onto these, might be of interest, love grandma, we've been there." And I love this point that the postcard seemed to emphasize this authentication of, we've been to this kind of place. And so these are all of the sorts of things that I was interested in at the beginning of the project and wanted to dive into more deeply.

Elizabeth: Right, of course, because when you've been there and bought the postcard, you don't have to send it to have proof of you--

Lydia: Yeah, it's like this souvenir thing that it's like: here's my material thing that shows that I was a proper tourist.

Elizabeth: So I know that one thing that we talked about. And also one thing that I'm interested in, because I'm working in the photography collection, I'm an art historian by training. And I've, you know, also done research into the history of postcards, particularly how their images and

the peer and then how they're related to nostalgia and other things. So I know there are a lot of visual histories of postcards out there that look at that. But can you tell me a little bit how your study differs? Tell the audience how this book differs from other postcard histories.

Lydia: Right. There are a lot of postcard histories. Pardon me. There are a lot of postcard histories that have been written and they're brilliant, and they're awesome. And when I was doing the background reading for this project, what I found was a lot of these postcard histories would pick a specific type of postcard that they would dive into critique postcards, or they would dive into American holiday postcards, or postcards from Imperial Russia. That they seem to look at a specific subset of postcards to focus their attention. And what I wanted to do was I wanted to capture that feeling of a sort of grandeur or vastness that I had experienced looking at the collection at The New York Public Library. And to look at postcards as a broad artifact class, that it was all postcards, what could we say about the material lives of postcards writ large? And so some of the postcards that I ended up looking at, I think I would have overlooked if I had tried to narrow the focus a little bit more. I think that I wouldn't have been able to spend the time diving into some of these sort of eccentric or other or really cool and fascinating postcards. So here are a couple that are in the collections at the public library. And the one on the left is actually pressed seaweed. So it's a botanical specimen that's been pressed and attached to the postcard. They're stored in those protective sleeves. It was fascinating. It's from Point Reyes, I believe. And the postcard on the right is actually part of a little set, they're a little teeny, teeny tiny postcards and they're supposed to be kid sized, these little kid size postcards. And I just had to laugh because I thought well, that would be really hard for a little kid to write a little postcard on this little teeny, teeny tiny, tiny set of postcards, but they're super cute. And so what struck me about looking at postcards was sort of all of this spectrum of all of the ways that postcards could be manifested was the idea that the postcard could become a sort of scripted experience. And that on some level it didn't matter what was on the postcard because it was the act of buying, sending and receiving it that sort of brought all of the postcards together.

Elizabeth: Exactly. So here are some more--

Lydia: Exactly, and they're just these amazing sets of postcards. So here there are -- these are some examples of sets of postcards. So the ones that we looked at previously, are sort of individually filed in the card catalog shelves, these are filed as folders of postcards, and I loved how postcards could be set together as a set. And that you could sort of -- here's what all of the picture postcards of Vienna look like, here's what all of the picture postcards of this place or this place look like. And there was this sort of scripted expectation for how a place ought to look. And you see that sort of codified in these folders of postcards.

Elizabeth: Yeah, and you can also say that these different, you know, buying a set and sending it out, it's like a pre-packaged way of sending one message to many different people. Right?

Lydia: Exactly, exactly.

Elizabeth: So we have lots of sets, I threw these in.

Lydia: No, I was so excited that you had thrown these in, they're fantastic.

Elizabeth: At The New York Public Library, and these are from the Harvey Ginsberg Postcard Collection. And they are quite fascinating in terms of their visuals, and here you see this, especially on the right, this one woman is representing all of the country, just depending on her dress.

Lydia: Yeah, no, it's just--

Elizabeth: She's recycled. And then I also threw in these. Maybe you can speak a little bit to how postcards are, in a way very close to greeting cards and what the relationship there is.

Lydia: It's such a great question. So there are so many different ways and types of postcards that exist, sort of, in the postcard history, that they are tied to the greeting card industry. But one of the things that I was really struck with, with postcards like this, is that even as a set or as they're manufactured here together, they're put together in a way that is very scripted for somebody to follow, right? So that by the turn of the 20th century there's the picture that's printed on the front. And then there's the space, the divided space on the back. And there's a whole history that's sort of ensconced in how that codified sense of postcard gets to be. But here are -- looking at these that, from sort of an art history perspective, these are very different than the set that we looked at, that you showed in the slide before. And those are very different than the slide before that. But they're all really similar in the space that they offer for somebody to write and send the postcard.

Elizabeth: Right, exactly. And you talk in your book about how the commercial sort of the ease of one piece of paper, right? But that's not in an envelope that you write on the back, the economy of the image.

Lydia: Right, that it's in some ways, this incredibly cheap print that's meant to be circulated. And it's not necessarily meant to be saved, that there are certainly ways to collect postcards that are done in the turn of the 20th century and even into the 19th century. But the idea is that it's inexpensive, it's cheap, it's ephemeral. And, you know, they're printed on the scale of hundreds of billions. And so there is going to be sort of a non-permanence to the kind of print that we don't see with other things.

Elizabeth: Right. And I'm just going to -- we talked about this before, so I'm going to share with our audience this is just something we wanted to throw in because it's truly remarkable. These are postcards that have hair, and ribbons and bows.

Lydia: I was so excited that you threw these examples in because yes, they're just amazing in the textural quality of them.

Elizabeth: So people did all sorts of things with postcards, they continue to use them in various creative ways, and we just had to show these to our audience. So we will move from hair to the lives of postcards, and in your book you mentioned the lives of postcards, sort of their material life as tangible, social, and personal objects. So I wonder, with this postcard from Stockholm, if you could speak a little bit more about what you say in your book and --

Lydia: Right, I love this particular postcard. So it's from 1970. And it was sent to the Picture Collection staff, with sort of the idea that it's going to be accumulated and part of the collection right from the get go. And one of the things that I was particularly interested in exploring in my book was the history of the blank in printing, and looking at how the reverse side of the postcard offered all of this space for people to be able to participate in the media, and to just sort of have that kind of short scripted space for people to participate in.

Elizabeth: Good. You spend quite a bit you have a whole chapter devoted to postcards that are from countries that don't exist anymore, and from places that don't exist anymore. So, you know, that's certainly a different thing that's not in the other postcard history so can you speak a little bit more about that.

Lydia: Yeah, and this is an idea that came directly from working with collections at New York Public Library. I was in looking through the catalogs of stuff, I was really struck by the labeling and struck by -- look, these are postcards from Czechoslovakia, here are postcards from Ceylon, and if you flip the divider over, you'll see Ceylon has been relabeled as Sri Lanka. And you'll see the same sorts of updating of geographies. And it makes me really want to dive into the question of how postcards are artifacts of time that we've talked about, that that they're here at the sort of golden age of postcards at the turn of the 20th century. But they're also artifacts of geography and of space. And I wanted to explore how postcards could be these material artifacts from places and countries that are no longer here. Interestingly, stamp collectors call these dead countries, which was a terminology that I hadn't been familiar with. And really, I found it almost very poignant, in looking through the sort of constant shaping and reshaping of geographies, in the 20th century.

Elizabeth: And here we have some good examples.

Lydia: Yes, these were two that I found fascinating from the Bosnia and Herzegovina filing cabinet floor. These are from Mostar. And these are actually examples of what are called real picture or real photo postcards. Most of the other pictures that we've been looking at are printed. And these are postcards that are pictures that were taken and then printed on to postcard stock.

Elizabeth: Yeah, you can see maybe the audience I am not sure about your computer screens, but you can see there's some slight silver mirroring here, which emphasizes that it is indeed an original photograph. And in your book, you talk quite a bit about how the camera and film manufacturers were selling stock and, you know, a special format just for postcards. So you

could have your postcard camera. And you know, and take pictures specifically for postcards. So I wonder if you can elaborate on that a little.

Lydia: Yeah, it felt like this incredible sort of democratizing of images and image taking and again, sort of showing that there's hey, I'm here I'm participating in this, here you can see this picture of me or this picture of my family, here at this tourist spot or at this -- the postcard could also serve as a cheap family portrait. It feels a lot of other sort of portraiture and picture niches. But once it is relatively easy to take the picture and to develop it onto the postcard stock. You start seeing these real picture postcards, these real photo postcards just start exploding, the popularity explodes.

Elizabeth: And this has to do with you know, your comparison that these postcards really are like a social network, right? And so maybe you could even -- and you do in the book, see these as akin to posting on Instagram, right?

Lydia: It felt like every real picture postcard image that I looked at, I felt like if I dug far enough into Instagram, I felt like I could find a contemporary parallel. And so again, it felt like it was a way of emphasizing that there are just some sorts of images that perform well when we want to share them with others.

Elizabeth: Exactly. And we can, you know -- you talk a lot about countries that no longer exist. And we think about these postcards or artifacts, again, this word artifact that we keep using from something that is no longer the way that it was conceived, even though the place actually still exists, it has a new name. But likewise, photographs as -- postcards as photographs also depict things that are historical events and are moments in history, right? So we have here these postcards from the First World War that are quite interesting. So maybe you can speak to these a bit.

Lydia: Yeah, and so I really liked your point about how these real picture postcards sort of served as early documentation that it sort of feels like this is nascent photojournalism. And so certainly the first couple of decades of the 20th century we have examples of these real picture postcards that are being taken and sent either from troops that are involved in military actions or photographers that are working for newspapers, that the postcard, the real picture that's associated with the postcards, it becomes one that that really becomes that sort of first foray into photojournalism. And there are sort of pros and cons that come with that, sort of there are certainly -- there's certainly the sense of like, I'm here, I'm taking this picture, here is me documenting what I'm saying. But we also see examples where the images for real picture postcards are easy to be manipulated or changed. And so again, a lot of the same concerns that we would have a century later, we see being played out about image manipulation, we see being played out with these early 20th century, real photo postcards.

Elizabeth: Right, you see that here in these -- you speak of propaganda too in your book, and you see that in these messages that are sent from the visual image, but also you can assume

I'm sure, in many of the cases that the people buying, collecting and sending these types of postcards are agreeing with the image that's on the front.

Lydia: Yeah, exactly, that you can really sort of see these sort of propaganda messages perpetrating along these kind of social network lines.

Elizabeth: Right. And I like that we have here a postcard of the destruction of the war. And then we have this total opposite side, which is the, you know, oh, here we have a tank, a train tank. And we also have men on horseback and everything looks very, you know.

Lydia: Right, they become an important -- the propaganda becomes a really important point of nation building, particularly across Europe and Asia in the 20th century. And postcards become an easy way of participating in that kind of propaganda and that kind of nation building.

Elizabeth: And it's not only nation building, because we also have other political events too. Such as the suffragette procession, postcards.

Lydia: I was really struck by the way that postcards played into the suffrage movement, both here in the United States, but also in England, and real picture postcards, as well as printed postcards were sources of fundraisers, they were sources of again, this, hey, look, here I am at this rally, at this parade, at this whatever. And so all of the different ways that people are using postcards that we've touched on, come to play in the suffrage movement. I'll also throw in the observation that for as much of the sort of pro-suffrage postcards that there are, there are equally as many anti-suffrage postcards that are created and distributed at the same time. And so again, you sort of see the media propaganda of postcards working along, both lines there.

Elizabeth: And again, you could hear, draw parallels today to social media networks in which you have images that go both ways, depending on who your friends are.

Lydia: Yeah, exactly.

Elizabeth: And one important thing that we both wanted to talk about is that often in the past, especially during the heyday of postcards, which maybe you can explain a little bit about when that was, there were people pictured in the postcards in often and what we would now consider a very derogatory manner. So maybe you could speak a little bit to that history.

Lydia: Right. Excuse me. So the golden age of postcards is largely taken to be 1890 to about 1910/1920. And the practice of putting people's images on postcards has a lot of the same sorts of histories and background that we see in questions of portraiture, and other sorts of photograph taking practices. Specifically, in terms of photographing people, we see particularly in colonial contexts, or in Imperial contexts, we see a lot of othering of the people that are being photographed. A lot of times people are photographed without their permission. They're not compensated for their being placed on a postcard. There's simply something to be consumed by

the postcard maker, the picture taker, the postcard maker, and then the person sending the postcard again. And I think that a lot of these early images of postcards become ways of reinforcing the stereotypes and expectations, particularly while people are traveling, and sort of wanting to send a postcard of something that they might perceive as exotic or other. But there isn't a lot of sort of nuance, I think that goes into some of these portraits. And as you say, we would consider a good portion of these to be hugely problematic now.

Elizabeth: Right. And what's interesting is that as you say, they're all part of this sort of commodified structure. And I chose this postcard on the right, because I found it was particularly striking. In our collection, we have a lot of postcards in which not only the back is written on, but someone writes something on the front, which here it says, I don't know if the audience can read, "I know a boy who knows this Indian Clara," that's what it says. So it's also about not only is it that I've been here, I've seen this kind of proof of the geographic location, or, you know, a historical event, but it's also like, oh, I've seen this other type of thing. And now I'm going to take that and show it to you. So there's this interesting dynamic involved there.

Lydia: It sort of feels like the postcard becomes a material authentication.

Elizabeth: Yes. And, of course, we don't know, in this instance, it could be that you know, we don't even know the circumstances behind the man who is posing for this picture. And who has probably been asked to do this and was perhaps not even compensated. So really interesting. And for our audience, there are a lot of these kinds of postcards, you can find them in our collection on Digital Collections, but they are quite problematic. So I will throw out that warning. But we also have, again, lots of geographic locations. Here are some more examples where it is written on the front of the postcard to [multiple speakers] size the nature of the location.

Lydia: Yes, and I love these that we've put together here for this particular slide. Excuse me, because I feel like it really encapsulates the tourism angle to postcards, here are pyramids and it's labeled Cairo. Here is a sunset in Singapore; here are, you know, these amazing nature scenes, here is this very sort of archetypical kind of architecture sort of postcard, and they have become these sorts of tropes that are performed with the postcards. We've been talking about, sort of, the postcard as an authentication tool. And I really love how these different turn of the 20th century postcards become important tools for authentication of, “Hey, I was here. I bought the postcard, I sent you the postcard.” So now you kind of feel like you have this tied to this geographic place as well. And so it sort of perpetuates the geography to people who haven't necessarily been to the place as well.

Elizabeth: Right, there's a sense of this place as shown in the postcard and the way that it should be, right? And the way that I should experience. So it's an [inaudible] and a statement of importance. And I think, you know, this is why postcards are such a big part of the tourist industry even today, because you have the stereotypical view, like it -- and this I think, also, continue this thread has a connection to, you know, what people might post on Facebook, like, I was here at Mount Rushmore, I was here at the geyser in Yellowstone, or I was here on the

Ferry Building in San Francisco. And this is the view that I must share with you because this is also the view that I can buy on a postcard, right?

Lydia: Exactly. No, I think that that's very true.

Elizabeth: So I think that we have, I am looking at the chat and the question and answers, and I think we should just open it up to questions. Because I think this is such a fascinating topic that we want to have time to hear from our [multiple speakers] --

Lydia: Yes.

Ian: All right, thank you, both so very much. We have had a very active chat. And we have a number of very interesting questions. Here's a rather long one, but I think it's a good one to start the Q&A section. It reads, I'm wondering if you might speak more to the authentication aspect of the postcards, as material mementos, souvenirs, etcetera, and how they might have fit into longer genealogies of such material objects prized for the memorial value.

Lydia: That's an awesome question, actually. And as Elizabeth and I were talking, I was thinking about the old Baedeker travel guides, right? They are these -- they're sort of the Lonely Planet, but for the 19th and early 20th century. And the Baedeker travel guide would tell you where to go, what to see, where to see it, how to see it and offer this very sort of scripted tourist experience. Even in the Baedeker guide, there were, in some places there were notes about where to buy your postcards, so that you could actually send these back. And so I think that there are a lot of ties to the souvenir industry and the tourism industry. But what I think also makes postcards so unique is they share a parallel history with the history of print and looking at the history of print being a social phenomenon. And so I think what we see with postcards is actually the merging of tourism with the history of print.

Ian: Very fascinating. And as the Curator of Maps, I completely agree with you.

Lydia: Okay.

Ian: We've had a lot of discussions in the chat about racism, xenophobia, prejudice that are dealt with in these postcards, obviously these are snapshots of time periods. From both your perspective, Elizabeth as a curator and Lydia, your perspective in writing the book, how do we deal with these more sinister aspects of human nature and history, both from a library setting and then both from your perspective, Lydia in writing the book?

Elizabeth: I'll speak to that first. If I may, we decided that we should include those postcards in this and I think, also as a library you have problematic things in a collection. Museums, libraries, institutions have problematic things and it's how you use those tools and how you share them that can shift away from how problematic they are in the sense that you can use them to educate, you can use them as examples. And really, as historical moments. I mean, honestly, as

I was going through some of our collections and seeing some of these postcards, I completely appalled and I'm laughing not because it's funny, but just because it was so shocking to me even though you know that there is this history, until you see it in front of your face it's more abstracted. So I think that it's very important that we use these kinds of things as tools for teaching history, you know, how problematic things can be, how racist and xenophobic they can be, and then move forward from that, because we shouldn't forget that this was a very wrong way to view people.

Lydia: Yeah, no, I completely agree with Elizabeth's point. And some of the postcards that I explored in my book were postcards from the Mexican Revolution. And they were truly horrific. And I made the conscientious decision in my book to not include pictures of burned bodies, or charred bodies, or hangings or lynchings or things like that. Because I felt like I did not have the appropriate space to be able to contextualize these with the treatment that they deserved. And I was uncomfortable reprinting postcards without having sort of a family's permission or without sort of having that kind of context. And I felt like places, institutions like public libraries or the Smithsonian that have done some amazing archival work with specifically lynching postcards, I felt like they were better situated to be able to properly contextualize those.

Ian: Thank you both for those very thoughtful answers. Lydia your last answer ties into a number of questions we have in the Q&A, which again, both if we get an institutional answer from you Elizabeth, and an answer from you Lydia in regards to the book is, you know, these are postcards, especially if they were written and sent that have people's names on them. They have information. How has privacy dealt with, both institutionally with NYPL and then in your book, Lydia? Like, how is it protected?

Lydia: Yeah. So those are really great questions. And it really felt like at points during the writing of this, it felt like I was reading people's text messages from over 100 years ago, it was just like, wow, this is odd or confusing, or wow, that's a little bit racy. I'm not sure that that's entirely appropriate to, you know, to republish. And so, for myself, the decisions that I made in publishing names and addresses and things like that, I felt comfortable publishing things that I had, that were part of family collections, like my personal extended family collections. And having talked with folks there about that. I felt comfortable about that. And then in terms of institutional republishing I think that there aren't very many examples where the names, any kind of name or address or message would have been reposted that wasn't in public domain already.

Elizabeth: I mean, that really just ties into the answer here is that these are considered in the public domain. And yes, we can see who signed this postcard, right? But in a way, it's considered so far in the past that it's okay. So, it would be very different if we had postcards from five years ago.

Lydia: Right, and so for example--

Elizabeth: These are quite old.

Lydia: For example, I do include a couple of postcards that my nieces and nephew had sent to me. And so in that instance, I just include the front, I don't include the back.

Ian: Okay, thanks, Lydia. And thank you Elizabeth. So that actually connects to another question we have in the Q&A, which is, can you speak to the nature of the messages that you may have found on the backs of the cards you examined? Were there instances of disconnects between the image and the message? And can you speak to that a bit more broadly? Thank you.

Lydia: Oh, my goodness, yes. There are anything and everything that appears on the back of a postcard, anything and everything that you have ever texted is definitely -- I can guarantee I can find a corollary on the back of a postcard. And so there were some I remember one postcard that was in a family collection. And it's this really sort of like, saccharin, sappy, cutesy, little postcard with like, a little cherub doing some kind of little dance. And then on the back, it's from some guy named Frank who's sending a postcard to my great grandfather, Robert, who says, "Hey, I'm going to catch the 7 p.m. train." You know, hope to see you there. And I just felt like okay, that's the picture you wanted to send with catching the train. Okay, you know, maybe that's what's available. But there are definitely instances where there's only so much you can say, because it's such a small area. And so I think that a lot of the nuance for postcards. I think it's not it, it's probably the amount of nuance that you can post in a tweet is about the amount of nuance that you can get in a postcard.

Ian: Yeah, and we did have a comment on that about kind of like the telegraphing of writing kind of shortening shorthand.

Lydia: Right, right. And as Elizabeth pointed out, a lot of times, you'll see people try and sort of cheat that space, by wrapping onto the front side of the postcard, and it sort of continued on front, and then you see it sort of wrapping around, all the way around.

Ian: I have a question that may be kind of a little too metaphysical, but it's about the authenticity of sending postcards. We didn't really touch on too many of them. But for example, like postcards of fine art, or maybe like, you know, if you were at the airport in Cairo, but you didn't actually go to the pyramids. So did you run into that at all? Or can you speak to that at all? I've always found that fascinating.

Lydia: That's a brilliant question, where it's sort of like, "Well, I went to Cairo, but I didn't see this particular pyramid, can I still send a postcard of this particular pyramid?" And I think that you find, I think the answer that you find is that people do and they don't. So they will say, "Well, I was -- I was in Cairo. And so that's the picture people would expect to see from Cairo. And so I'll go ahead and send that." But I also think that there's, particularly with the real picture postcards, where it's here, here's a picture of me standing in front of this particular thing that I saw at this particular moment in time, that adds a sort of extra element of realism to it. And authentication, like here's Great Uncle Bob, next to this particular monument. Oh, yeah, he really went to that

monument because I can see this picture of him.

Elizabeth: I will add that though sometimes the real photo postcards are bought, right? Just as a printed postcard is bought. And sometimes well-known photographers would make postcards of their sort of art, their art photography work, and you could buy those and send those as, you know, smaller pieces of art, basically. And they were also produced, in part, as you know, souvenirs from exhibitions, right? You could see the work. And then and instead of buying the work, which you can afford you can buy the postcard of the work.

Lydia: Right, but I love that the postcard sort of becomes the sort of the affordable, the cheap, the easily exchanged.

Elizabeth: It's like buying a poster, right? You go to the museum, you see a painting you love, and then you buy the poster, and I think -- or you buy the postcard.

Lydia: Or you buy the postcard, yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah. So --

Ian: Yes, definitely a relatable experience. We've had a number of comments in the chat throughout the presentation, a couple in the Q&A, as to [inaudible] people who have personal postcard collections and who are interested in how libraries work and how the book was constructed, is how do you organize when you're looking at this many postcards, when you could have multiple access points and subject headings? Like you're looking, you know, it's like horses, or a pyramid or Egypt or so how do you make up decisions both in all those instances?

Elizabeth: I can answer a little bit to what our collections here at the library. So you saw what Lydia, the snapshots of the cabinets in the Picture Collection, which are organized by country. And then in the photography collection, which is a separate collection here at the library, we also have postcards. And they were organized -- the Harvey Ginsberg Collection was organized by Harvey Ginsberg. And he, you know, he did sort of thematically and then there's also organizing the collection based on who made the postcard. And sometimes we have a whole series of Detroit Publishing Company postcards, and they are organized according to the number, because every postcard had a number. So there's the 7000 series, the 8000 series. So there's that kind and often those numbers are tied with the geographical locations. But in that instance, we've chosen to organize the collection based on the pre-established numbering system. So there's, of course with any collection, there are multiple ways of organizing and you know, you can do whatever suits you best basically.

Lydia: No, that's fantastic. And when I started to sit down and to think about how did I want to organize a book that looks at something with this kind of magnitude, I really tried to find things that I thought were curious and really piqued my interest. And so I looked at print being a social phenomenon, I looked at tourism, I looked at countries that no longer exist anymore. And so

once I had those themes, then I would look for examples that I felt like really, that were really typical of those themes or really helped me think about the material life of a postcard in a different way. And so, once the themes were established, some of the examples would come from The New York Public Library collections, some would come from personal collections, some would come from other institutions.

Ian: Thank you very much. Elizabeth, we have a question from Zulay. Can you say something about postcards not allowing messages to be written on them? We believe it was illegal to write on postcards originally. Does that sound familiar at all?

Lydia: I can jump in, well, Elizabeth, if that -- I don't mean to cut you off.

Elizabeth: No, no.

Lydia: Okay. So when postcards are first invented, and first being sent around, there is sort of a push back, particularly in Austria and other European countries, where postcards have to be legally defined to be able to go through the mail. And so there is the period of time -- and that becomes true in England, and it becomes true in the United States as well that what is possible to be put on a postcard has to be approved by the postal system. And so in the United States specifically, it's not until sort of 19 -- oh, gosh, I'm going to mess up. It's not until later in the postcard. It's surprisingly later in the postcard history, that you would think that postcards are actually allowed to have pictures printed on them. But the very first postcards are basically what we would call today index cards, that are just the address on the front and the message on the back. But it's not until later on in the postcard history that it becomes the typical thing that we think of today with an image.

Ian: That's completely --

Elizabeth: I think Lydia answered that really well.

[Laughter]

Ian: I love it.

Elizabeth: But I know the Austrian example. And that, you know, there were just a few -- in a way, it was almost like Twitter, like you could only say so much.

Lydia: Yep. And it sort of is interesting in that it becomes this semipublic message that you're sending, right? Because it's not sealed, it's not carefully in an envelope. It's semipublic. And so the question of what could be written on the back, there are some really interesting examples of we're not going to deliver this because we find this to be too saucy or too salacious. So yeah.

Ian: I love it. Elizabeth, before we wrap up, could you speak a little bit to how people can access

our postcard collections and methods for research and how research can be done at our wonderful institution?

Elizabeth: You can come here anytime, we're open basically, and stop by the Picture Collection, which is currently moving but still on the first floor, and you can still access it in room 100 right now. And you can also come to the Photography Collection, any time after 1 p.m. in the afternoons, Tuesday through Saturday, and request to see postcards, it really depends on what you are looking for. My advice is always to talk to a staff person, to email ahead of time, a call and we can really direct you and ensure that you have the best patron experience that the materials that you want to see are what we have ready for you and that you can find them very easily, honestly. And I would like to say one thing that we didn't talk too much about was your -- I like the title of your Chapter 4, "Having a wonderful time wish you were here." So maybe you can speak a little bit to that.

Lydia: It felt like such an archetypical phrase, right? That it's just -- that's kind of what you can fit on the back of a postcard. But it was fascinating to see variations of that showing up decade after decade of sort of be: "Here I am in this place. I'm not with you. But I'm thinking of you," and this postcard is going to be the material thing that connects us. And so the idea of “having a wonderful time, wish you were here” really hit home to me the idea that postcards are personal. And that became one of the themes, the idea that postcards are personal became one of the themes that I really wanted to explore.

Ian: [Inaudible]. Thank you both so very, very much. And thank you everyone that joined our session. Please if you registered, which you all did, stay tuned for a blog post with the video recording for today's talk and links to related resources. And these will be emailed to everyone who registered for today's event. Recordings for our previous sessions can be found on our blog. And please stay in touch, I put links to our social media in the chat as well as our monthly newsletter. We have another exciting Work/Cited program coming up on Wednesday, March 9th, at one o'clock Eastern Standard Time, when NYPL's Cara Dellatte will be speaking with the award-winning historian speaker and writer, Kimberly A. Hamlin, about her recent book, *Free Thinker: Sex, Suffrage and the Extraordinary Life of Helen Hamilton Gardner*, and the fascinating story of “Heathen Helen,” the “fallen woman” who reinvented herself and became “the most potent factor” in Congressional passage of the 19th Amendment. You can register at this link that I have successfully put in the chat yet again. And thank you to Lydia and Elizabeth for a fascinating program. We are all very grateful.

Elizabeth: Thank you.

Lydia: Thank you.